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Language and Literacy in East Timor

The Role of the Mary MacKillop Institute of East Timorese Studies

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LANGUAGE AND LITERACY IN EAST TIMOR

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When Pope John Paul II addressed the United Nations Assembly on 5 October, 1995, he stated:

> *"A presupposition of a nation's rights is certainly its right to exist..... This fundamental right to existence naturally implies that every nation also enjoys the right to its own language and culture, through which a people expresses and promotes that which I would call its fundamental spiritual sovereignty. History shows that in extreme circumstances, such as those which occurred in the land where I was born, it is precisely its culture that enables a nation to survive the loss of political and economic independence. Every nation therefore has also the right to shape its life according to its own traditions....Every nation has the right to build its future by providing an appropriate education for the younger generation."* (1)

These sentiments expressed by the Pope sum up exactly what is at the heart of the Mary MacKillop Institute of East Timorese Studies. Before speaking about the work of the Institute, I should like to make some general comments about language, literacy and identity with special reference to the East Timorese people.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

The East Timorese are an amazing people. For more than twenty years they have demonstrated such strength and endurance against enormous odds. To this day, their resistance to Indonesian occupation is deep and persistent. They refuse to succumb to the powerful aggressor. It is truly a David and Goliath story.

When I visited East Timor at the end of 1994, a Church person of advanced years took me aside and said: "Please pray for us. We are not at peace. No matter what those in high positions say, our people do not want them (the Indonesians)". The situation in East Timor is as basic as that: our people do not want them. There are many obvious reasons for this rejection, e.g.

* the East Timorese have unjustly and illegally been robbed of their land. Moreover, the East Timorese are held captive in their own land. They are virtually prisoners, denied freedom to speak, to live, to make decisions for themselves.

* the East Timorese have been brutally treated, humiliated, destroyed. They have been stripped of human rights and dignity.

* predominantly, the resistance comes from their identity. They are East Timorese, they are a unique people, their own people, a silenced people who proclaim strongly who they are with their eyes and their hearts. Freedom - physical, political, economic - may be denied them

at this time. But they refuse to surrender the greater freedom, the freedom to be who they are, East Timorese.

This leads me to the question of cultural identity, a complex question for the East Timorese as for any group of people. I do not intend to go into the complexities.

Others have done significant work in this area and have dealt with the complexities which have influenced the development of the East Timorese people and culture. (2)

While there are differing patterns of culture, language and lifestyle within the territory which is East Timor, there are deep rooted ethnic and historical difference between the East Timorese and their Indonesian counterparts.

Timor's easterly situation contributed to its isolation from early population movements. Neither the introduction of Hinduism in the 2nd century nor the influence of a Javanese empire from 13th to 15th centuries had any effect on Timor. Some Malay words came into the local languages through contact with Moslem traders after the 14th century, but Islam made no impact. Strong ties with Oceania rather than with South East Asia are apparent in the people's Melanesian ethnic origins as well as in geographical, zoological and botanical elements of their land.

Furthermore, the culture of the East Timorese people has been irrevocably and radically altered by the Portuguese influence. Four hundred years of colonialism by this European power with its distinctive religion and language has meant that the East Timorese have been formed by vastly different experiences to their Indonesian peers. The East Timorese perceive themselves as a unique people. Consideration of their historical, cultural and ethnic differences shows the solid basis of their claim to individual identity.

The East Timorese, then, have an East Timorese identity. As I heard one asylum seeker say recently, "We are not Portuguese, we are not Indonesian, we are East Timorese!"

LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

Language is the vehicle through which we express our identity. At the place of our deepest self, there is no language - there is no need for it - but as we attempt to communicate who we are, we grapple for sounds and words to do so. It has been my experience working in spiritual formation with people from various cultures that when they wish to express their deepest self, their true spirit, they use that language which is natural to them - their first or native language. It is interesting and encouraging to note that Tetum is the language chosen by the Church in East Timor for its liturgy and catechesis.

It was a great pleasure and privilege to meet and speak with Abe Barreto recently and to share something of his struggle to express the poetry and song of his troubled people. I was interested to know that most of his poems are written in Indonesian but his songs are in Tetum. The point I want to make here has been well said elsewhere:

Every people needs to tell its stories. To hear in its own language the tales of life what makes them who they are. In twenty one years of struggle the languages of East Timor have been targeted for destruction. They remain a fundamental foundation for East Timorese identity. Abe's poetry reflects the complexity of his generation's experience in these twenty one years. Much of it is written in Bahasa Indonesia, the language taught (by law) to Abe in his schooling. He translated his own work into English. Increasingly though, Tetum develops as a language for written, as well as oral, expression. (3)

This leads me to speak briefly about the work of Mary MacKillop Institute, and in particular, the principles underlying our approach to literacy.

LITERACY - PRINCIPLES AND INFLUENCES

The primary principle to which we are entirely committed is an understanding of the cultural context and the need for cultural rootedness for the literacy programme. Everything in culture is symbolic, language being the primary symbol of a people. The transmission of culture is the primary function of education, and literacy plays a major role in this transmission. Every people wants to hold onto the creative side of who they are, who they see themselves to be, how their land and their living came to be.

For some people, more specifically, the indigenous peoples of many countries, meaning and value resides in the land, their myths and legends and oral tradition. Their lived experience can be grouped simply under three main headings - " BEING, DOING, and SEEING" i.e. BEING - living out and expressing who they are, DOING - the actions which accompany the living e.g. cooking, working, building, relating, SEEING - their world view i.e. philosophy, spiritual heritage, ideologies.

The Tetum literacy programme as it is presently being devised draws significantly on experiences of implementing literacy programmes among Aboriginal Australians particularly some of the traditionally-oriented peoples of the Northern Territory and the Kimberley region. One people, in particular, has become associated with our work and has already shared its stories and artistic talent with the East Timorese. These people are the Tiwi of Bathurst Island, a small island just a short distance from Darwin. In fact, East Timor is their nearest neighbour to the west across the Timor Sea. We have come to refer to our association with them as the Tiwi-Timor connection. Earlier this year, a group from our Institute spent time at the Nguiu Literacy Centre on Bathurst Island. (4) The group included two East Timorese translators as well as a Teacher-Linguist with considerable experience in Aboriginal languages who spent 18 years among the Tiwi, recording and implementing the literacy programme. (5) We learned many things as a result of our experiences with the Tiwi people. Here are some of the most significant:

* The cultural approach to literacy is essential if the people are to maintain and develop what is uniquely theirs. This approach tries to take hold of the insider's point of view, to understand as far as possible their over-riding world view. In the case of the Tiwi people, this is centred in relationship with one another, the land and their ancestors. Identity is not personalised but arises from the community, the people and the law. The challenge is to evoke the stories and the lived experiences of the people not only in oral but in written form. Like the Tiwi, the East Timorese are rich in their cultural inheritance. Unlike them, at this stage their culture is under enormous threat.

They are in the throes of cultural genocide. Many Aboriginal communities in Australia have faced this abomination. Many Aboriginal languages have been lost forever and many cultures destroyed. For example, out of the hundreds of Aboriginal languages which existed in Australia, it is estimated that few will survive the next century. This cannot be allowed to happen in East Timor. Language and culture must be respected and developed while there is still time.

* Cultural transmission is the primary function of education in any culture. As in most cultures, Tiwi children learn much by deliberate observation and imitation at home, as part of an extended family and some is learnt through absorption. Some of the passing on of their cultural heritage is included in formal instruction though the school curriculum in the Tiwi language. This bilingual or "two-way" approach has lead to ownership of what has formerly been imposed i.e. western/foreign style schooling and become a vehicle for cultural transference to their children. Unfortunately in East Timor, both under Portuguese colonisation and Indonesian occupation, there has been no opportunity for a bilingual approach. First Portuguese and then Bahasa Indonesia have been the imposed languages of education. Through the instigation of Bishop Belo, Indonesian authorities have permitted the teaching of Tetum for three hours weekly, a policy which had already existed throughout Indonesia. This is a paltry concession but it is at least a step in the right direction.

* It is a basic educational principle that the development of the child is enhanced by learning to read and write his or her own language first while learning a second language orally. The child using cultural patterns of thought while developing literacy in his/her first language is able to transfer skills to the learning of a second (perhaps dominant) language more easily. The sequence of learning constitutes a natural development of language and language learning. If however, the first language is by-passed and the child is required to learn to read and write in a language with which he/she is not familiar, the child is faced with disconnectedness and confusion e.g. when the written symbol *lafaek* (crocodile) together with the oral pronunciation is presented to a Tetum speaking child, he/she will immediately understand the meaning of the symbol. If presented with a foreign symbol e.g. the Bahasa Indonesia word for crocodile *buaya* either in written or oral form, the child has no meaning with which to make the connection.

This also has implications for the teaching of Tetum as the lingua-franca among the many local languages which comprise the linguistic complexity of East Timor. While it is sound education theory and practice to have children learn in their own language first, and while all spoken languages are important and are not to be excluded, practicality demands at this stage that literacy be developed in Tetum as the most widely spoken and understood of the languages of East Timor.

* Perhaps the most pleasing and important feature of this cultural approach to language and learning among the Tiwi and other Aboriginal peoples is their growing confidence and capacity to take control of their children's education. This is accompanied by the development of self-esteem and the widening of the social and cultural dimensions of education. The Tiwi people, for example, have inserted into the curriculum of their primary school other important aspects of learning such as land and environmental studies, social and cultural education, and concepts in mathematics and science unique to the Tiwi experience.

LITERACY WITH THE BEST OF CONTEMPORARY TECHNIQUES

The programme is based on a language experience approach and as such is centred on holistic learning and designed to enhance oral tradition. The simple analogy "we learn to fish by fishing" may best describe the approach. The language development arising out of this language experience approach to literacy is an attempt to help children to be immersed in the values and ways of thinking of the indigenous people concerned.

The programme draws on the best of contemporary techniques in design and transmission. It acknowledges the oral-rich environment of the home and/or the village and the need to develop a literacy-rich environment in the school. It recognises the basic educational principle that the development of the child is enhanced by learning to read and write his or her own language first. Then is the child able to transfer skills to the learning of a second (perhaps dominant) language. In the case of a Tiwi child, the transference is from Tiwi to English. For an East Timorese child, their first encounter with literacy is with a foreign and imposed language, Bahasa Indonesia. As has already been said, if presented first with literacy in a foreign language the child has difficulty in making the connection between meaning and either the oral or written symbol.

MARY MACKILLOP INSTITUTE OF EAST TIMORESE STUDIES

The Institute began on 8 August, 1994, after a meeting between Bishop Belo and the Sisters of Saint Joseph in Sydney. During this meeting the Bishop spoke of the educational and other needs of the Church in his diocese. In response to the Bishop's appeal and after consultation with members of the East Timorese community in Australia, the Institute was established

* to assist the Church in East Timor in the work of general education and catechesis through the medium of the Tetum language

* to preserve and strengthen the Tetum language as a means of safeguarding the culture and identity of the East Timorese people

* to support the well-being of all East Timorese people, to promote their human dignity, their culture and religious traditions.

During the first two years of our operation, a number of books and resources were produced. (6) After a great deal of difficulty we have been fortunate to have two shipments of books arrive in East Timor, which have been distributed to schools and are now in use. After visiting East Timor in December 1994 and again in June 1996 during which we had consultations with Bishop Belo and other educational and Diocesan authorities, we were encouraged to begin work on the development of a literacy programme with suitable resources for the graded teaching of Tetum in the schools. The development of this programme is now underway. It faces many challenges, not the least being the necessity to do the slow and painstaking work of standardisation. The initial work of Geoffrey Hull needs to be acknowledged here. (7) Further work in this field requires constant checking with the people whose language it is, and so it is apparent that the task is not yet finished. The almost total lack of any educational resources makes the teaching of any subject difficult, to say the least. The infrastructure for supporting the major printing programme required for the establishment of this literacy programme does not yet exist in East Timor, hence the necessity of working with the community in Sydney, printing the books there and then shipping them to East Timor. Within the present climate of fear, oppression and restriction in East Timor and with rapid Indonesianization destroying the local culture, the task seems enormous but not without hope.

"A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." In the case of this Tetum literacy programme the first steps have been taken. The first year of a six year primary teaching programme has been completed and is ready for perusal, comment and alterations by the linguists and educational authorities of East Timor. The programme comprises a number of basic stories under individual cover with supplementary stories, totalling about thirty in all. The stories are culturally based with appropriate illustrations, mostly in colour. Detailed teachers notes accompany the books to facilitate their effective use for individual and class work. (8)

There are two major constraints, among others, operating at this stage in the production of this whole programme. The first is the almost total lack of teacher training for teachers of under twelve year olds in East Timor. The few existing training facilities are used for secondary teachers. Therefore, an integral part of the introduction of this programme into East Timor will be basic training for the teachers to teach it.

Another constraint needing to be mentioned is the unfortunate tendency of the East Timorese people to look upon their languages as of lesser importance to those imposed on them. The dominance of the languages of the coloniser and now of the invader have succeeded partly in denigrating the mother tongues, instilling in the people a

lack of confidence and a lowered sense of self worth. Domination of ideas and their expression in language is essential if those in control are to remain in power.

The fact of the matter is that Tetum has the potential to develop, to bear the weight of the world's literature, to express the technical and artistic aspirations of the people whose language it is. This programme merely marks a beginning, the beginning of a challenging, energising and worthwhile venture which will assist the East Timorese people to claim and express their identity. We acknowledge that this venture requires a sea of work. The development of the language will continue to experience growing pains. There are various opinions on various matters regarding the standardisation, e.g. some spelling, the use of hyphens and accents. Major decisions will have to be made by the people as to which linguistic influences should be allowed scope. It is to be recognised that this process is a long and involved one and that it cannot be imposed from outside the culture without risking an artificiality and a sterility. One only has to reflect on the development of English to see that richness of expression is within the competence of the people to conceive and bring to birth, and that the task of linguists and educators is to provide the guidance and resources to allow this process to happen.

It is obvious that the preservation of the languages of East Timor and the education of the people in those languages is of the very fabric of the East Timorese struggle. That Tetum is still spoken by two thirds of the population is evidence of the resolve of the people to ensure the survival of their culture and of their determination to resist the cultural onslaughts of the Indonesians to the last syllable. However, the objective of all the East Timorese and of those who support them must be not only the survival of the culture, but its deeper expression and development. The East Timorese have a "fundamental spiritual sovereignty" which is unique, as do the people of England, Tonga, Nepal, Portugal or anywhere else on the face of the globe. This identity, feeding on its own traditions, has the potential for boundless development and is worthy of a future, a future dependent on reflective action taken now.

EDUCATION AND THE PROMOTION OF FREEDOM AND JUSTICE

Freedom is basic to the growth and development of the human person. Fear undermines life. The East Timorese must be free to express the richness of their lives, identity, culture and religious traditions in dignity and respect. This freedom does not exist at the moment, and its repercussions are devastating to the people. The world is the poorer for the shackling of the East Timorese. The following letter from an expatriate Timorese is a poignant testimony to the havoc wreaked within their culture.

The writer states:

My recent visit to Timor has shown how needed it is to promote certain aspects of Timorese life which has degenerated these past twenty years.

I believe that through simple stories one may bring to awareness certain aspects of life so as to value what one's culture offers.

There's a need to instil the love to care for one's land, the need to revive the art and crafts which were popular in Timor once. The need to recognise all work and all people regardless of social status, as equal human beings.

Children that I came across both primary and secondary are not familiar with our own legends where good values can be imparted. Some artistic talented young persons lacked creativity. I believe because their exposure to media such as books are limited. They therefore need books like children's books with quality illustrations.

I give thanks to God for enlightening you with such a project which will be a heritage to the Timorese.....

The basic needs of the person must be met for true education to occur. During our visits to East Timor, we found health and living conditions deplorable. Poverty is widespread and disease is rampant. People suffer and die from controllable diseases and most are affected by malnutrition. Medication is non-existent or too costly, available mainly through black market sources and beyond the reach of poverty-stricken East Timorese. In justice, these conditions must be rectified. Our Institute is presently looking at the possibility of supporting a polyclinic in Dili through the provision of resources and health education.

A form of education needs to be developed which enables individuals to develop their full potential and which encourages them to place their gifts at the service of the community. It is obvious that much education is occurring in East Timor but the need for educational development in almost every aspect of the community is also painfully obvious. This includes education for leadership, management, for health and welfare, in the creative arts, music, catechetics, religious teaching and perhaps the most critical area of all, the promotion of unity and reconciliation. And all of this rooted in the cultural context with language at its heart.

The challenge is great and the time is now to look at education, its history, its fruits, its needs, its policies and processes so that when the sun of freedom rises in the east, Timor Loro-Sa'e will rise like the dawn.

Endnotes

1. United Nations General Assembly, Official Records 20th Plenary Meeting (New York: 5th October 1995), 3.

2. see for example, James Dunn, Timor: A People Betrayed (Sydney: ABC Books, 1993, 1996).

3. quoting Kieran Dwyer in Matebian News (Sept-Oct 1996 Ano 4. Vol. 4 No. 3), 5

4. A more detailed account of this visit is in our Newsletter Ba ami-nia belun sira (March 1997 Vol. 2 Issue 1).

5. see for example, Teresa A Ward, Towards an Understanding of the Tiwi Language/Culture Context: a Handbook for non-Tiwi Teachers (Nguiu, Bathurst Island, Nguiu Ngiringawila Literature Production Centre, 1993).

6. Between 1995 and 1997 twelve publications were produced, including children's stories, background linguistic materials, catechetical and health books. Some of these are on display.

7. see various published works, including Mai Kolia Tetun: A Beginner's Course in Tetum-Praça The Lingua Franca of East Timor (North Sydney, ACR and ACSJC, 1996).

8. Examples of the Literacy programme. The present output includes materials such as the following:

Moris Iha Knua ("Life in the Village" by Maria Imaculada Dos Reis Piedade and illustrated by Edwin Reid - Book 1 of Tetum Literacy Programme, Standard 1)

Saida Maka Balada Sira Han ("What Animals Eat" by Maria Imaculada Dos Reis Piedade and illustrated by Ancilla Warlapijimayuwu Puruntatameri - Book 1.1 of Tetum Literacy Programme, Standard 1)

Bá tiha ikan ("Fishing" by Maria Imaculada Dos Reis Piedade and illustrated by Ancilla Warlapijimayuwu Puruntatameri - Book 2 of Tetum Literacy Programme, Standard 1)

Saida Maka Balada Sira Halo ("What Animals Do" by Estudante Yangali sira 1985, translated from Tiwi to Tetum by José M Viegas and illustrated by Fiona Kurluparntuwu Kerinauia - Book 2.1 of Tetum Literacy Programme, Standard 1)

Lenuk Ki'ikoan Ida ("A Little Sea Turtle" by Marguerita Kerinaiua, translated from Tiwi to Tetum by Maria Imaculada Dos Reis Piedade and illustrated by Ancilla Puruntatameri - Book 6.1 of Tetum Literacy Programme, Standard 1)

Iha Jozé nia To'os ("In Jozé's Garden" by Maria Imaculada Dos Reis Piedade and illustrated by Marguerita Putuyatingimawu Kerinaiua - Book 7 of Tetum Literacy Programme, Standard 1)

Iha Uma ("At Home" by Maria Imaculada Dos Reis Piedade and illustrated by Madre Irene Macinante RSJ - Book 9.1 of Tetum Literacy Programme, Standard 1)

Jezús Kura Ema-Fo'er Ida ("Jesus Cures an Outcast" - bible story for children translated by José M Viegas)

Jezús Kura Mane Moras Ida ("Jesus Cures a Sick Man" - bible story for children translated by José M Viegas and illustrated by Marguerita Putuyatingimawu Kerinaiua)

Jezús Ho Rai Lakan ("Jesus and the Storm" - bible story for children translated by Maria Imaculada Dos Reis Piedade and illustrated by Fiona Kurluparntuwu Kerinauia)

None of the books in Endnote 8 above is yet available out of draft form, as they still require final approval from authorities in East Timor. Examples are on display.